



Setti D. Warren
Mayor

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Candace Havens
Director

MEMORANDUM

DATE: July 12, 2013

TO: Alderman Marcia T. Johnson, Chairman
Members of the Zoning and Planning Committee

FROM: Candace Havens, Director of Planning and Development
James Freas, Chief Planner, Long-Range Planning
Brian Lever, Senior Preservation Planner 

RE: #64-13 NEWTON HISTORICAL COMMISSION
requesting the creation of an administrative permitting process for converting historic barns and carriage houses into accessory apartments to assist in their preservation.

MEETING DATE: July 17, 2013

CC: Board of Aldermen

INTRODUCTION

For many residents of the City of Newton, the City's historic village centers and homes are an important part of what makes the City an attractive place to live and are a contributing factor towards the City's sense of place and quality of life. For that reason, historic preservation has long been an important City function. One of the greatest preservation challenges the City faces is the preservation and rehabilitation of historic accessory buildings such as carriage houses. Property owners have numerous reasons to demolish these buildings, from the cost of maintenance and rehabilitation to the lack of economic purpose and existing preservation tools have generally proven ineffective in preserving this class of historic buildings. By allowing these buildings to be repurposed into accessory dwelling units, the City can create the economic incentive and value necessary to encourage property owners to assist the City in preserving its architectural heritage, while also supporting a range of environmental and housing goals expressed in the *Newton Comprehensive Plan*. To that end the

Newton Historical Commission is requesting the creation of a streamlined process to facilitate the conversion of these historic accessory buildings into accessory apartments. The purpose of the following memo is to introduce some the background information relative to the preservation of these valuable historic accessory buildings.

ANALYSIS

Historic accessory buildings are artifacts of Newton's agricultural past and Victorian era transportation methods. During the late 19th century and early 20th century, barns, stables, carriage houses, and auto-houses were a common sight throughout the City. As farms gave way to mid-19th century suburban neighborhoods, numerous barns throughout the City were demolished or occasionally repurposed into housing. By the late 19th century, carriage houses and stables were commonplace as owners of horses and carriages often boarded their horses elsewhere and stored carriages on their property. With the advent of the automobile, a new accessory building known as the auto-house (the rarest of these buildings) was seen in Newton before the widespread use of cars and construction of stock concrete garages. Within the past century, the rise in popularity of the automobile, and the subdivision of country estates both contributed to the destruction of historic accessory buildings as these buildings fell out of use.

An analysis of historic City of Newton atlases shows that in 1917 approximately 1,400 accessory buildings existed throughout the City. These buildings were found in every village and were a common sight contributing to the historic character of streetscapes. Planning staff have completed a survey of the existing historic accessory buildings remaining in the City and have found that roughly 330 of these buildings remain. Of those remaining, 70 are now either the primary building on a lot or attached to the primary building. This was often the result of subdividing larger estate properties into smaller lots and having the accessory building converted into a residence. This leaves approximately 270 which remain as accessory buildings. A small portion of the remaining accessory buildings have been converted into accessory apartments or home offices through a Special Permit, an exact accounting is unavailable. Those that have not been converted to new uses are often used as storage, garage space, or are vacant.

Historic accessory buildings have their own unique preservation challenges which are recognized throughout the Boston area. Often historic accessory buildings are so deteriorated that they present a safety hazard and therefore the purview of the Demolition Delay is negated. Additionally as they are not dwellings, the buildings are easily neglected and waiting out the Demolition Delay poses little difficulty. The Newton Historical Commission has continually expressed concern over the loss of these buildings and a comparative analysis of historic maps suggest that over the past 100 years approximately 75% of these buildings have been lost. Approximately 330 historic accessory buildings such as barns, carriage houses, auto-houses and stables remain in the City of Newton. Given the ineffectiveness of the Demolition Delay Ordinance to preserve this class of buildings, the Commission

requests that the City provide an incentive to facilitate their reuse and preservation. To that end the Commission proposes an administrative process by which the owner of an historic accessory building be allowed to convert such a building into an accessory apartment. Over the past five years the Newton Historical Commission has reviewed the proposed demolition of several historic accessory buildings, such as barns and carriage houses. In only two instances, the use of Newton's Demolition Delay proved successful in preventing demolition.

Unlike residences, historic accessory buildings are often underutilized, easily neglected, and are very expensive to renovate. The buildings were usually not constructed to bear the weight of a vehicle and while they may have had housing facilities in a loft, they do not meet today's building code standards and rehabilitation would require all new plumbing, heating, and electrical systems. The buildings themselves are also often larger than the allowed 700 square feet for garages, and potential dwelling units within them are sometimes larger than the 1,200 square feet allowed for an accessory dwelling unit. In 2006, the City of Newton created an Accessory Apartment Incentive Program to provide financial assistance to property owners to create affordable accessory units. The main challenges noted by Housing staff and property owners were the expense of renovation, the affordability requirement, and the necessity of obtaining a Special Permit. Each year Planning staff discusses converting historic accessory buildings, such as carriage houses, with property owners and frequently, the time and expense of the Special Permit process deters property owners from pursuing this option to preserve the structure.

Creation of accessory apartments out of existing building stock allows for development that is consistent with many of the goals of the *Newton Comprehensive Plan*, including promoting environmental sustainability, historic preservation, and a diversity of housing types. By preserving historic buildings the City avoids the environmental impacts of demolition whereby these building are converted to construction waste. Additionally, creating accessory apartments in historic accessory buildings provides flexible housing options that can contribute to the diversity of Newton's population. Finally, these buildings represent an important part of the historic character in many of the City's neighborhoods and their preservation contributes to the essential *Comprehensive Plan* goal of protecting neighborhood character.

While the Newton Historical Commission is not in the position of offering financial assistance, the Commission is willing to provide technical guidance and review projects for their sensitivity to historic character. Therefore the Commission requests that in any administrative review procedure for the conversion of historic accessory buildings into dwelling units that either it or its staff have the ability to review and approve any proposed exterior alterations.

Many communities have established efforts to assist in preserving these buildings. Some such as Belmont and Reading have created specific bylaws that allow for their conversion into housing (like Newton) through a Special Permit. Somerville has passed ordinances allowing the conversion of these

buildings through Special Permit to Bed and Breakfast facilities and Home Business uses. Through a state preservation grant, Brookline published a book on historic accessory buildings as a public education effort, and allows these buildings to be converted into housing through a Special Permit. Arlington and Hingham have historic preservation trusts whereby property owners of historic buildings can apply for low-or no-interest loans to assist in or cover restoration costs. These efforts, while beneficial, still create a regulatory obstacle to the rehabilitation of these historic buildings rather than provide a substantial incentive to preserve them. Staff has discussed the tactics taken by different communities with their respective Planning Staff and found that obtaining a Special Permit deters applicants from applying to repurpose these buildings.

NEXT STEPS

Staff welcomes the Committee's input on topics and areas of research that should be considered in the development of a potential amendment to the Zoning Ordinance. Staff will also continue to reach out to key stakeholders such as the Newton Historical Commission, Historic District Commissions, the Newton Housing Partnership and others as may be identified in the process or suggested by the Committee.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A: Letters of Support



Setti D. Warren
Mayor

CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Chestnut Hill Historic District Commission

John Wyman, Chair

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July 9, 2013

Mr. Donald Lang, Chairman
Newton Historical Commission
Newton City Hall
1000 Commonwealth Avenue
Newton, MA 02459

Subject: Preservation of Historic Accessory Buildings

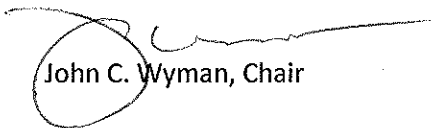
Dear Mr. Lang,

I am the Chairman of the Chestnut Hill Historic District Commission and write this letter to express the support of the Chestnut Hill Historic District Commission for the proposal to change the City of Newton zoning regulations to permit an expedited review of the conversion of carriage houses, barns and other similar structures into accessory apartments. Chestnut Hill, like many other areas in Newton, has a number of nineteenth and early twentieth century carriage houses and barns constructed during the pre-automobile era which have fallen into disuse and are, in many instances, slowly decaying. The proposed changes in the zoning ordinance would, we believe, provide an incentive for owners of these structures to rehabilitate and maintain some of these important structures in Chestnut Hill and elsewhere in the City.

The Chestnut Hill Commission periodically receives applications to alter properties in the District which include a carriage house or other historic accessory structure. While the Commission can deny a Certificate of Appropriateness for the demolition of such structures, it has no authority to require the property owner to maintain or preserve the structure. We believe that allowing a property owner to convert such a structure into a residential structure would benefit the City both by preserving and maintaining the historic structure and by providing additional housing opportunities within the City. The proposal provides the unusual opportunity for the City to do two good things at once: preserve some decaying historic structures and provide some additional housing opportunities.

The Chestnut Hill Historic District Commission unanimously voted to recommend the adoption of the proposal for the preservation and reuse of carriage houses, barns and other historic structures in the City and urges its adoption.

Sincerely,



John C. Wyman, Chair

Chestnut Hill Historic District Commission
1000 Commonwealth Avenue, Newton, Massachusetts 02459
Email: blever@newtonma.gov www.ci.newton.ma.us

26 March, 2013

Mr. Donald Lang, Chairman
Newton Historical Commission
Newton City Hall
1000 Commonwealth Avenue
Newton, MA 02459

Re: Preservation of Carriage Houses in Newton

Dear Mr. Lang:

As current chairman of the Newton Upper Falls Historic District Commission I am writing to encourage the City of Newton to adopt new measures to encourage the preservation and reuse of carriage houses in the city. This is a building type which is unique to a specific time period of the city's history and an important historical resource for coming generations. Much, if not most, of the housing stock in Newton was constructed prior to the ubiquitous reliance on the use of the automobile and the ambiance and quality of life in some neighborhoods of our city would be adversely by the disappearance of this unique building type.

In addition, Newton has always been a desirable place to live and I believe there is a strong market demand for affordable housing in neighborhoods with existing infrastructure and easy access to public transportation. Because of their modest size the conversion of a carriage house to a habitable residence would be ideal for young people just starting out and should be considerably more affordable than a new structure of comparable size.

Precautions, however, should be taken to insure that the historic nature of the existing structure not be adversely affected by the necessary conversion to a new use. Changes in exterior appearance should be permitted only with diligent scrutiny to make certain that conversions do not have a deleterious impact on the ambiance of the site or the neighborhood.

This issue was discussed and voted upon at the last meeting of the NUFHDC and there was unanimous agreement that this issue should be pursued with vigor.

Sincerely,

Lawrence C. Schwirian



Setti D. Warren
Mayor

CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS
Auburndale Historic District Commission
Italo Visco, Chair

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May 8, 2013

Mr. Donald Lang, Chairman
Newton Historical Commission
Newton City Hall
1000 Commonwealth Avenue
Newton, MA 02459

Subject: Preservation of Historic Accessory Buildings

Dear Mr. Lang,

I have had the pleasure of serving as the Chairman of the Auburndale Historic District Commission since the district's inception in 2005. Auburndale is a region of the City blessed with a substantially intact building stock, revealing a record of the area's historical development. Among the structures in the district are a good number of carriage houses, barns, and other secondary buildings that lend the neighborhood a varied sense of scale while emphasizing the bucolic nature of the City's past. In addition, these accessory buildings often compliment the styles of the primary houses, while also contributing to the disposition of the landscape.

I am writing this letter to encourage the City of Newton to preserve these secondary buildings and to protect the character of their settings by adopting new bylaws or rules which might permit their reuse as separate homes, grandparent units, or similar small residences.

Of course, controls on the type of modifications permitted to these properties would be required – both to preserve their own historic value, as well as to protect the desirable qualities of the residential neighborhoods.

Please let me know if I can be of any further assistance in this matter. Thank you for your interest and your support.

Regards;

Italo S. Visco, Chair

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May 28, 2013

Donald Lang
Chairman, Newton Historical Commission
City of Newton
1000 Commonwealth Avenue
Newton, MA 02459

Dear Mr. Lang,

My name is James Gross, and I am the Chairperson of the Newtonville Historic District Commission (the "Commission"). The Commission has authorized me on its behalf to write this letter in support of an expedited permitting process for converting historic barns and carriage houses into accessory apartments. It is my understanding that current regulations require a special permit to convert a barn or carriage house into an accessory apartment. Moreover, we have been advised that the special permit process for such a conversion generally takes between four to six months, and, in most instances results in the approval of the proposed conversion.

As a result of the special permit requirement, many developers are unwilling to spend the time, effort and money necessary to obtain a special permit to allowing a conversion of these structures. Rather, developers determine that it is simply much less time consuming and expensive to simply demolish these structures. Moreover, we have been advised that many homeowners are intimidated by the special permit process and simply allow the carriage houses to deteriorate. As a result, many of the historic carriage houses are either demolished or fall into disrepair. In either instance, historic buildings are lost and the historic fabric of the communities is permanently diminished.

In lieu of the present special permit requirement to convert carriage houses, the Commission is supportive of those who have suggested the creation of an administrative review process for converting historic barns and carriage houses into accessory apartments. We support the idea that the Planning Department and the Board of Aldermen can create a set of criteria by which an administrative review by the staff at the Planning Board to approve and/or disapprove of a proposed conversion. The Commission is hopeful that by expediting the conversion process, the reasonable conversion projects will be approved without great delays or expenses, and that in that way both developers and homeowners will be persuaded to attempt to preserve the historic structures in our community, and thereby enhance the historic neighborhoods throughout the city.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "James C. Gross".

James C. Gross, Chairperson

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